Fight on Nike System Is Brought Into Open

11/11/66

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara pushed himself closer to the brink of a multi-billion-dollar Nike X decision by admitting yesterday that the Soviet Union is deploying such an antiballistic-missile-system around its cities.

Military leaders in the past and Congress this year have urged a faster pace on Nike X, while McNamara has insisted that the present research effort of about $500 million a year was adequate.

Congress appropriated $167.9 million more this year than McNamara requested for fiscal 1967 for Nike X. Of that addition, $153.5 million would go for buying the hardware needed to gear up for production and the rest for faster research.

The issue now, though, is not whether to spend this extra money but whether to go into production and then deployment of the Nike X antiballistic-missile system.

At the least, an operational system to defend against relatively primitive Chinese missiles would cost about $4 billion. And the price tag to defend against sophisticated Russian missiles has been put at between $20 to $30 billion.

Besides the cost, many U.S. policy makers fear that going ahead with Nike X production and deployment will accelerate the arms race with the U.S.S.R.

In December of 1965, a nongovernment committee headed by Roswell Gilpatric, former Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Jerome B. Wiesner, former White House science adviser, urged Washington and Moscow to "agree—explicitly or tacitly—to a moratorium of at least three years" on any new deployment of antiballistic missiles.

The United States knew at the time that the Soviet Union was moving to deploy an ABM system and intelligence officials gave hard evidence of this to Congress at hearings this year on the Defense Department budget.

But McNamara has now brought what was a behind-the-scenes battle into the open. The argument over how to respond to the Russian ABM deployment and the Chinese missile advances is going on right now in the Pentagon.

See NIKE, A19, Col. 1

Research leaders are marshaling their arguments on what a Nike X system around the United States would actually mean in military terms. McNamara is convinced that any all-out Russian attack would penetrate a Nike X defense, as our missiles would theirs, so the issue turns on the deterrence value.

Would a Nike X defense lessen the chances that the Soviet Union or China would fire its missiles in the first place? This is the key question in McNamara's mind.

Since 1956, about $2.3 billion has gone into the research on an ABM system. This effort has put the United States within reach of a defense against missiles far better technically than the Societ Union's.

As one Pentagon leader put it, "We're two generations ahead of the Russians in development and half a generation behind in deployment."

If this estimate is correct, the United States will not have an ABM system in place before the middle or late 1970s. The reason is that it takes a long time to set up the production of the immensely complicated radar and the missiles that make up Nike X.

Has Political Side

The Specter of the Soviet Union with an ABM system while the United States tinkers to improve one of its own is the kind of situation the new crop of Republicans in Congress could be expected to seize upon with all the fervor President Kennedy showed for the alleged "missile gap."

This makes the Nike X decision far more than a strictly technical one. And for that reason, President Johnson will almost certainly be the one actually making it.

If the President does decide to go ahead with the Nike X, he will be under pressure to tie it in with an expensive program to build fallout shelters. McNamara has stressed the folly of buying Nike X without defending the population from deadly fallout.

President Johnson requested $47.3 million for fallout shelters for fiscal 1967 and $32.7 million the year before. But Congress has refused to appropriate the money.

The Nike X system uses two different types of missiles. The Nike Zeus is designed to hit misslies far out and cover a wide area while the Sprint missile zooms up at tremendous speed to destroy those warheads close in that have eluded Nike Zeus.

Lt. Gen. A. W. Betts, chief of Rrmy research and development, told Congress earlier this year that while this Nike X combination—even after the expenditure of $30 billion on it—would not shield Americans from all incoming Russian missiles, "we would have a fairly good chance" of denying Red Chinese "any significant ability to penetrate the defense."